CROSSROADS 2000
A Women's Sharing Circle:
Exploring Opportunities and Challenges Facing Urban Aboriginal Youth

A BACKGROUND PAPER

Prepared by: **The Canada West Foundation**

Prepared for: **The Crossroads 2000 Steering Committee**

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The Canada West Foundation (CWF) is a non-profit and non-partisan public policy research institute located in Calgary, Alberta. This report was prepared by CWF Policy Analyst Melissa Dickey.

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ABOUT CROSSROADS 2000

Crossroads 2000: Preparing the Landscape for Aboriginal Youth will bring together 60 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women from the Calgary area in order to address the challenges and opportunities facing urban Aboriginal youth. The workshop will provide a space where intercultural learning and sharing can take place. The overall objective of *Crossroads 2000* is that participants will take this new knowledge back to their spheres of influence in order to create opportunities for urban Aboriginal youth. *Crossroads 2000* will also create a network of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women.

Crossroads 2000 is taking place at Nakoda Lodge, Alberta, October 27-29, 2000.

INTRODUCTION

Canada is considered one of the world's most prosperous nations Canadians enjoy a high standard of living, good health status and high life expectancy, economic growth, high levels of education and employment, and quality housing (UNDP Human Development Index, 2000). Yet all Canadians do not equally experience these benefits of developed nationhood.

As the findings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996) reveal, Canadian Aboriginal peoples face a myriad of social and economic challenges, including unemployment, racism, health concerns, poverty, and high educational dropout rates.

These disparities take on additional weight in light of demographic studies which reveal that the Aboriginal population has dramatically increased its size in recent years, and this population boom is expected to continue. Unlike the overall pattern in Canada, the proportion of Aboriginal children and youth has been growing, representing 53% of the total Aboriginal population in 1996. Canada's 424,000 Aboriginal young people constitute 5% of all children under the age of 15 and 4% of youth aged 15 to 24 (RCAP, 1996). Thus, while the Canadian population as a whole is aging, the Aboriginal population is growing ever younger (RCAP, 1996). The challenge for Canadians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, is to work together to create the necessary environment in which Aboriginal youth can thrive.

This background report aims to provide the reader with a broad overview of:

- The historical relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples;
- Aboriginal culture in Canada;
- Past and present policies relating to Aboriginal populations; and
- Present day realities, with particular attention to issues that challenge urban Aboriginal people.

This report was compiled by a review of available literature, statistics and research studies. Due to its brevity, the discussion serves primarily to highlight key themes in Canadian Aboriginal history and policy. While this paper focuses on Aboriginal people, it does not attempt to cover the specific history or lives of Metis people. Readers interested in further information should consult the resources listed in the bibliography.

How are Aboriginal Canadians defined in Canadian Public Policy?

Aboriginal Population: refers to those people who identify with at least one Aboriginal group, i.e, North American Indian, Metis or Inuit. The term also includes those who report being a Treaty Indian or a Registered Indian as defined by the Indian Act of Canada, as well as members of an Indian Band or First Nation.

Metis Population: refers to a specific group of Aboriginal people of Aboriginal and European heritage with historical roots in Canada.

Inuit Population: refers to an indigenous nation in the Canadian north, which has maintained a distinct culture.

Registered Indian: refers to those people who are registered under the Indian Act of Canada.

Non-registered Indian: refers to those Aboriginal people who are not registered under the Indian Act of Canada.

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Demographic Comparison of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Canadians

	Aboriginal Canadians	Non-Aboriginal Canadians
Population Projection: 1991 – 2016	Increase: 52%	Increase: 22%
Median Age	25 years old	35 years old
Life Expectancy	Men: 66.9 years	Men: 74.6 years
	Women: 74 years	Women: 80.9 years
Employment Rate (between ages 15 – 65)	54%	71%
High School Completion Rate	20%	70%
Poverty	Four times as many Aboriginal people as non-Aboriginal people are at or below the low-income cut-off.	

Source: Statistics Canada 1996.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The present challenges facing Aboriginal people are rooted in the historical relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This section highlights the evolution of this relationship, with particular emphasis on the interaction of the Aboriginal and European cultures. Formal public policy that guided this relationship will be explored in the following section.

Aboriginal Society Pre-Contact

Unfortunately, there are few accounts of pre-contact Aboriginal life. Aboriginal culture and history is largely passed down through oral story telling. Because the usual lines of oral history telling were broken by the assimilation policies of the British, and later Canadian, governments, many stories and traditions have been lost over time (Dickason, 1997).

It is known that the ancestors of the Canadian Aboriginal population lived on the North American continent long before explorers from other continents made their first visit. There were an estimated 220,000 to 300,000 Aboriginal people, speaking over 50 different languages, living in Canada at the time of European arrival (MacLean, 1982). As such, a great variety of cultures existed, and the people survived with and off the land in accordance with their geographic surroundings (Dickason, 1997:43).

Although the cultures were diverse, Aboriginal communities shared in common a way of life rooted in fundamental values concerning their relationships to the creator, the environment, and each other (RCAP, 1996).

Many Aboriginal communities shared the same concept regarding the unity of the universe. They shared the belief that all living things possessed similar powers to humans, although not all animals, trees or weather patterns held the same type or strength of power (Jenness, 1932). Aboriginal myths and legends frequently referred to the power of the spirit world, and to the importance of remaining in balance with nature (MacLean, 1982).

The social organization of many Aboriginal communities was egalitarian to the extent allowed by their sexual division of labor and responsibility. In other words, each individual in the group had a specific role in the community, and this role was respected by all (Dickason, 1997). A leader representing the common will governed Aboriginal communities. As

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decision-making was done by consensus, skills of persuasion were invaluable to leadership. Failure in this regard meant loss of position (Dickason, 1997). Although there was hierarchy within and between various communities, most commonly based on wealth and heredity, one's social life was based on a complex weave of reciprocity (Dickason, 1997).

European Contact: The Beginning of Change

Between the 16th and 17th centuries two great European powers – France and Britain – arrived in North America and laid claim to land that was already inhabited by Aboriginal communities. Both powers regarded the independent and self-governing Aboriginal peoples living in the area as savages, and thus did not consider them worthy of land ownership (Comeau and Santin, 1995; McDonald, 1995).

Although both British and French explorers did claim Canadian land for their respective countries, Europeans were initially more interested in fishing than in settlement. France was experiencing a fish and meat shortage and needed North American fish. However, an abundance of land in France meant that settlement held little interest. Then, in the early 1600s, beaver hats came into fashion in Europe. At this time, the French decided to establish a fur trade with the Aboriginal population in Canada (Dickason, 1997).

At the same time, the British were trading in the far north. In 1670, a group of British colonists started the Hudson Bay Company. The British Government gave the Company sole right to trade in most of northern and western Canada. The British at this time had little desire to settle land, and encouraged Aboriginal people to continue a life of trapping (Dickason: 1997).

The Aboriginal people trapped beavers, and traded them in return for European goods. According to some historians, this was a mutually beneficial relationship: the Aboriginal people helped the Europeans survive the hardships of Canadian winters, and the Europeans provided goods that made life easier for the Aboriginal peoples (MacLean, 1982; Dickason, 1995). Other historians, however, believe that this reliance on European goods was the beginning of the erosion of Aboriginal culture. According to Dickason,

Common Features of Aboriginal Pre - Contact Culture

Leadership Style: Egalitarian and Representative

Agreement Styles: Consultative and Verbal. Both political and economic alliances had personal and social aspects.

Justice/Law: Based on the four principles of caring, sharing, honesty and respect.

Family: Extended family unit (e.g. some people could have up to six Grandmothers).

Kinship: Kinship was more than biological; it could also be established by means of networks of names and affiliations, such as membership in clans.

Age: Experience equaled knowledge. The older the person, the more she/he knew and the more respect was given.

Hospitality: In many Aboriginal cultures, giving away personal possessions was cause for celebration. Giving to others brought respect in Aboriginal communities. Sharing of knowledge and experience was also considered a gift.

Living with Nature: Aboriginal communities believed that all living things possess power and are significant to the world order. Certain inanimate objects were also given powers in mythology and legends.

Worldview: A philosophy that instilled collective and interactive principles.

Many Aboriginal groups in Canada are working to retain and re-assert these cultural values.

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> ...this first contact with European goods completely upset the Indian way of life. They could not resist the metal tools, so superior to their own in utility and convenience ... and they adopted them immediately. In consequence, they forsook their traditional crafts, they ceased to make their own weapons and utensils, and they modified their methods of hunting to suit the new weapons (1997).

It must also be noted that despite a high mortality rate due to harsh living conditions before the arrival of the Europeans, the Aboriginal population had sustained itself. Infectious disease, such as influenza, brought about by European contact caused a catastrophic drop in population after contact. Just one example of this dramatic decline in population took place amongst the Huron. When the Huron first allied itself with the French in 1633, its population numbered 30,000. By 1640, there were less than 12,000 Huron remaining (Comeau and Santin, 1995).

The Advent of British Rule

In 1759, after the British defeated the French in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, much of Canada became part of the British Empire. However, it was not until the 1776 American Revolutionary War that Aboriginal communities felt the impact of British rule. When Britain lost the war against the United States, many former US colonists moved North, and the population of Canada increased from 90, 600 in 1776 to 520, 000 by 1812. The British Empire encouraged this migration by offering generous grants of land located in Eastern Canada to colonists for farming (MacLean, 1982:123).

As mentioned above, rather than being interested in trade, these new settlers wanted to own and farm the land. In their quest for development, the new immigrants saw no place for the Aboriginal life-style. The Aboriginal people had to adjust very quickly – their land had been taken away and they were expected to alter their traditional way of living and adapt to a more sedentary life-style (MacLean, 1982:182).

It is important to note that Aboriginal communities saw all of what is now Canada as their land and not as something that could be taken away from them to be distributed by the British Government. As a result, Aboriginal communities fought for the land that they felt was rightfully theirs. The British Government decided to solve this land problem by persuading Aboriginal peoples to give up their land and live on reserves. The treaties that were developed and signed as a result of this decision continue to be the basis for dissention between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in terms of Aboriginal rights and access to traditional Aboriginal land base.

However, the fact that the Europeans signed treaties with Aboriginal people is regarded as proof that they believed that Aboriginal people had right to the land. About 500 treaties were signed between 1725 and 1923 (MacLean, 1982).

After the first treaties were made, the Government decided that the Aboriginal people should gradually be assimilated into European culture. As will be illustrated in the following section, Aboriginal policy has been informed by this decision for over 250 years.

POLICY OVERVIEW

There are two broad periods of Aboriginal policy in Canada. The first, beginning in the 1760s and continuing into the 1960s, was largely defined by assimilationist policies. This period ended in 1971, when the Government of Canada was forced to withdraw its "White Paper" due to heavy criticism from Aboriginal leaders and communities. The post- 1971 policy has been grounded in constitutional change and consultation. This section will provide an overview of these periods, demonstrating how the current constitutional policy model differs from the assimilation policies of Canada's recent past.

Assimilation Policies Under Canada's Indian Act

Before European contact, Aboriginal people had functioning social systems, complete with government, education, religion, economic and justice systems. Assimilation policies eroded this system. Examples of the outcome of these policies include:

- Granting the Government of Canada control of Indian status, Aboriginal land and citizenry. Until the 1960s, an Indian had to give up her/his status rights in order to become a Canadian citizen. Similarly, Status Indians were unable to vote until this time.
- Granting the Government of Canada control over and responsibility for Aboriginal peoples' financial affairs.
- Forbidding traditional forms of livelihood by creating reserves on which Aboriginal people must live.
- Forbidding the use of traditional forms of politics, such as consensus building, and replacing it with an electoral system.
- Forbidding the use of Aboriginal language.
- Forbidding traditional forms of healing.
- Forbidding traditional forms of teaching and learning.
- Forbidding the practice of traditional religion and replacing it with a Christian belief system.
- Forbidding traditional forms of policing and replacing them with a European court system.
- Removing children from families so that they could become "Christians" and "European-like" at residential schools.

Assimilation Policies: 1760s - 1969

In the period leading up to Confederation, there were two very different yet major principles underlying Aboriginal policy: concern for Aboriginal land and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples. The major goal of the first principle was to protect Aboriginal land from abuse and appropriation. The second principle stemmed from the belief that civilization could only be achieved through assimilation. However, while the government was promoting assimilation, the majority of Aboriginal peoples were isolated on reserves, away from mainstream society. This distance from mainstream society made assimilation virtually impossible. At the same time, the traditional way of life of Aboriginal people, such as hunting and gathering, was restricted by the borders of the reserve (Weaver, 1981).

These two principles of land management and assimilation, and their inherent contradictions, are present in both the British North American Act of 1867 (which is now titled the Constitution Act of 1867) and the Indian Act of 1876.

Under the Indian Act, "responsibility" for Indians was given to the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs. This included management of reserve land. Reserves were managed with a trustee-type relationship – the Government of Canada administered land through its provisions on "land-holding and land transfer, on taxation, local government, education, wills and estates, and band membership" (Weaver, 1981:18). Aboriginal people who did not live on the reserves were denied access to the benefits provided through this relationship, such as education and freedom from taxes.

As has been noted, before the Europeans arrived, Aboriginal people ran their own governments, religions, and had their own ways of teaching their children. Under the Indian Act, traditional religious practices were forbidden as Aboriginal people were taught the ways of Christianity. They were forbidden to speak their own languages. Children learned little or nothing of their own culture. Aboriginal government structure changed as a European system was implemented. Although chiefs and bands were elected, these elected officials had little power: important decisions were made by the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa. Traditional Aboriginal laws no longer served as the legal system and punishment was taken over by the police and the courts.

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War II period and continued into the 1960s. In the 1960s, for example, the Act was amended to allow Aboriginal people full rights of citizenship without any loss of cultural distinctiveness (Comeau and Santin, 1995). At the same time, however, the 1960 Federal Bill of Rights is notable for the absence of any specific mention of Aboriginal peoples while affirming certain rights "without discrimination by reason of race, national origin, colour, religion or sex."

Residential Schools

Residential schools operated from the mid-1880s to the 1980s. Many Aboriginal people were interested in mainstream schooling as a means of bridging the divide between their cultures and the culture of mainstream society. However, the Government of Canada saw residential schools as the most effective means to achieve total assimilation. Entire generations of Aboriginal children across Canada were (often forcibly) removed from their families and placed in residential schools away from their communities. The schools used very strict discipline to force the students to assimilate to mainstream culture. For example, the speaking of Aboriginal languages, the performance of Aboriginal cultural or religious practices, the expression of traditional beliefs, and the telling of traditional myths, legends and folktales were all routinely prohibited and often severely punished within the schools.

Many children were subjected to physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuse in residential schools. Students were also routinely taught that their families and communities were "heathen." This caused low self-esteem among many residential school students, and created a cycle of abuse. Many residential school survivors are seeking spiritual and professional help in order to recover.

The White Paper: 1969 - 1971

In 1969, the Liberal government proposed to abolish the Indian Act. Under the "The Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy," commonly referred to as the "White Paper," Aboriginal people would be entitled to the same rights, freedoms and responsibilities as other Canadians. Discrimination on the basis of Indian ethnicity would be prohibited under the Canadian Bill of Rights (The Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND), 1969).

By abolishing the special status provided to Aboriginal people, the White Paper was seen as the most severe of assimilation policies. As Long explains, "Indian leaders viewed the proposal as a design to divest Indians of their lands, their Aboriginal and treaty rights, and they feared a lack of support on the part of the provinces for the preservation of their cultural heritage, should their legal distinctiveness be removed. In effect, for the Indians, endorsement of the White Paper was seen as tantamount to committing cultural genocide" (1984:34).

This period can be considered the beginning of the Canadian Aboriginal political awakening. It represented a turning point in the history of Aboriginal involvement in and with the Canadian political process. Aboriginal leaders and groups from across Canada united in an effort to stop the White Paper from being passed. The Aboriginal reaction to the White Paper was extremely negative, as many saw the policy proposal as the most extreme expression of assimilation policy. As mentioned, the major intent of the White Paper was to abolish the special status of Aboriginal people in Canada. Under the Indian Act, Aboriginal people were given special status which, among other things, recognized land ownership. As a result, Aboriginal people believed that the Indian Act, in the context of an improved relationship with the Government of Canada and despite its negative historical influence on Aboriginal culture, was a preferred option to the White Paper. Largely due to Aboriginal political pressure, the White Paper was not passed.

Constitution and Consultation: 1971 - present

Post-White Paper Canadian Aboriginal policy has been guided by three separate principles: consultation with Aboriginal communities, settlement of land claims and negotiation of limited self-government. This movement signifies a break from the principles of past policy. However, and as will be discussed, the expectations of the Aboriginal people and the Government of Canada have often differed.

Consultation

The rejection of the White Paper fostered increased Aboriginal political involvement. As the question of a new Canadian constitution became part of the political agenda, Aboriginal people expected to be part of the negotiations. However, Aboriginal political leaders were not invited to participate in the negotiations, and found themselves once again on the political margins (McDonald, 1995:47). As a result, Canadian Aboriginal leaders united in the late 1970s to fight for the inclusion of Aboriginal rights in Canada's constitution. In 1980 Aboriginal groups succeeded in persuading the Government to include the following provisions in the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms:

- "Aboriginal peoples of Canada" was broadened to include the Indians, Inuit and Metis people.
- Recognition of existing Aboriginal and treaty rights was entrenched in the constitution (although left undefined).
- A constitutional guarantee that the Charter would not adversely affect Aboriginal rights.

The successful negotiation experiences with the Charter created expectations among the Aboriginal communities that Aboriginal peoples would be consulted prior to subsequent constitutional amendments. The Prime Minister and Premiers did not share this expectation, and in 1987 announced a number of changes, entitled the Meech Lake Accord. The Accord was agreed to by the First Ministers. Aboriginal groups, however, were unhappy with both the process used to create the Accord and the content of the Accord itself (it would have amended Canada's constitution without specific recognition of Aboriginal peoples). Aboriginal protest was instrumental in the Accord's failure.

When the Government of Canada re-opened constitutional negotiations 1992, Aboriginal people were included in the consultation process. However, the resulting Charlottetown Accord failed to receive majority support in a 1992 national referendum. After the failure of the Charlottetown Accord, constitutional reform fell off of the national policy agenda, and Aboriginal policy has since focused on land claim settlements and negotiations for self-government.

Constitutional battles led to a series of First Ministers Conferences (FMCs), the first held in 1983, to discuss additional Aboriginal rights that might be introduced into the constitution now that "existing rights" had been recognized. The most significant development of that first meeting was that the term self-government was officially entered into the "Canadian political psyche" (Comeau and Santin, 1995:20).

Consultation in the 1990s: The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP)

The RCAP was launched by the Government of Canada in August 1991 and was completed in 1996. The objective of the RCAP was to consult with Aboriginal groups on the question of "what is the foundation of a fair and honourable relationship between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Canada?"

The work of the RCAP is the most expansive of its kind (Comeau and Santin, 1995:25). As part of its investigation, the commission held 178 days of public hearings in 96 communities, consulted dozens of experts, and commissioned more than 300 research reports. The final report makes 440 recommendations that cover a wide range of Aboriginal issues. The commission proposes a 20-year agenda for change. It addresses means with which to improve the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The key principles of the RCAP are mutual recognition, common respect, fair sharing, and a partnership based on responsibility.

War II period and continued into the 1960s. In the 1960s, for example, the Act was amended to allow Aboriginal people full rights of citizenship without any loss of cultural distinctiveness (Comeau and Santin, 1995). At the same time, however, the 1960 Federal Bill of Rights is notable for the absence of any specific mention of Aboriginal peoples while affirming certain rights "without discrimination by reason of race, national origin, colour, religion or sex."

Residential Schools

Residential schools operated from the mid-1880s to the 1980s. Many Aboriginal people were interested in mainstream schooling as a means of bridging the divide between their cultures and the culture of mainstream society. However, the Government of Canada saw residential schools as the most effective means to achieve total assimilation. Entire generations of Aboriginal children across Canada were (often forcibly) removed from their families and placed in residential schools away from their communities. The schools used very strict discipline to force the students to assimilate to mainstream culture. For example, the speaking of Aboriginal languages, the performance of Aboriginal cultural or religious practices, the expression of traditional beliefs, and the telling of traditional myths, legends and folktales were all routinely prohibited and often severely punished within the schools.

Many children were subjected to physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuse in residential schools. Students were also routinely taught that their families and communities were "heathen." This caused low self-esteem among many residential school students, and created a cycle of abuse. Many residential school survivors are seeking spiritual and professional help in order to recover.

The White Paper: 1969 - 1971

In 1969, the Liberal government proposed to abolish the Indian Act. Under the "The Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy," commonly referred to as the "White Paper," Aboriginal people would be entitled to the same rights, freedoms and responsibilities as other Canadians. Discrimination on the basis of Indian ethnicity would be prohibited under the Canadian Bill of Rights (The Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND), 1969).

By abolishing the special status provided to Aboriginal people, the White Paper was seen as the most severe of assimilation policies. As Long explains, "Indian leaders viewed the proposal as a design to divest Indians of their lands, their Aboriginal and treaty rights, and they feared a lack of support on the part of the provinces for the preservation of their cultural heritage, should their legal distinctiveness be removed. In effect, for the Indians, endorsement of the White Paper was seen as tantamount to committing cultural genocide" (1984:34).

This period can be considered the beginning of the Canadian Aboriginal political awakening. It represented a turning point in the history of Aboriginal involvement in and with the Canadian political process. Aboriginal leaders and groups from across Canada united in an effort to stop the White Paper from being passed. The Aboriginal reaction to the White Paper was extremely negative, as many saw the policy proposal as the most extreme expression of assimilation policy. As mentioned, the major intent of the White Paper was to abolish the special status of Aboriginal people in Canada. Under the Indian Act, Aboriginal people were given special status which, among other things, recognized land ownership. As a result, Aboriginal people believed that the Indian Act, in the context of an improved relationship with the Government of Canada and despite its negative historical influence on Aboriginal culture, was a preferred option to the White Paper. Largely due to Aboriginal political pressure, the White Paper was not passed.

Constitution and Consultation: 1971 - present

Post-White Paper Canadian Aboriginal policy has been guided by three separate principles: consultation with Aboriginal communities, settlement of land claims and negotiation of limited self-government. This movement signifies a break from the principles of past policy. However, and as will be discussed, the expectations of the Aboriginal people and the Government of Canada have often differed.

Consultation

The rejection of the White Paper fostered increased Aboriginal political involvement. As the question of a new Canadian constitution became part of the political agenda, Aboriginal people expected to be part of the negotiations. However, Aboriginal political leaders were not invited to participate in the negotiations, and found themselves once again on the political margins (McDonald, 1995:47). As a result, Canadian Aboriginal leaders united in the late 1970s to fight for the inclusion of Aboriginal rights in Canada's constitution. In 1980 Aboriginal groups succeeded in persuading the Government to include the following provisions in the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms:

- "Aboriginal peoples of Canada" was broadened to include the Indians, Inuit and Metis people.
- Recognition of existing Aboriginal and treaty rights was entrenched in the constitution (although left undefined).
- A constitutional guarantee that the Charter would not adversely affect Aboriginal rights.

The successful negotiation experiences with the Charter created expectations among the Aboriginal communities that Aboriginal peoples would be consulted prior to subsequent constitutional amendments. The Prime Minister and Premiers did not share this expectation, and in 1987 announced a number of changes, entitled the Meech Lake Accord. The Accord was agreed to by the First Ministers. Aboriginal groups, however, were unhappy with both the process used to create the Accord and the content of the Accord itself (it would have amended Canada's constitution without specific recognition of Aboriginal peoples). Aboriginal protest was instrumental in the Accord's failure.

When the Government of Canada re-opened constitutional negotiations 1992, Aboriginal people were included in the consultation process. However, the resulting Charlottetown Accord failed to receive majority support in a 1992 national referendum. After the failure of the Charlottetown Accord, constitutional reform fell off of the national policy agenda, and Aboriginal policy has since focused on land claim settlements and negotiations for self-government.

Constitutional battles led to a series of First Ministers Conferences (FMCs), the first held in 1983, to discuss additional Aboriginal rights that might be introduced into the constitution now that "existing rights" had been recognized. The most significant development of that first meeting was that the term self-government was officially entered into the "Canadian political psyche" (Comeau and Santin, 1995:20).

Consultation in the 1990s: The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP)

The RCAP was launched by the Government of Canada in August 1991 and was completed in 1996. The objective of the RCAP was to consult with Aboriginal groups on the question of "what is the foundation of a fair and honourable relationship between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Canada?"

The work of the RCAP is the most expansive of its kind (Comeau and Santin, 1995:25). As part of its investigation, the commission held 178 days of public hearings in 96 communities, consulted dozens of experts, and commissioned more than 300 research reports. The final report makes 440 recommendations that cover a wide range of Aboriginal issues. The commission proposes a 20-year agenda for change. It addresses means with which to improve the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The key principles of the RCAP are mutual recognition, common respect, fair sharing, and a partnership based on responsibility.

Land claims

Land claims resolve Aboriginal rights to land resources, and are seen as a way to promote the economic growth and self-sufficiency of Aboriginal groups. Land claim agreements may address a wide range of rights and benefits including:

- rights to hunt and fish;
- guaranteed participation in land, water, wildlife, heritage resources, parks and environmental management;
- financial compensation; a share of resource revenue;
- and measures to stimulate economic development.

Self-government may also be included in the land claims negotiation, although it may also be negotiated separately.

From the 1970s to 1996, the Government of Canada provided Aboriginal groups with approximately $380 million for work on their claims. This money enabled Aboriginal peoples to conduct research into treaties and Aboriginal rights and to research, develop and negotiate their claims (DIAND, 2000).

Two significant changes occurred during this time in regards to land claim negotiations. The first was an announcement by the Government of Canada in 1986 of a new claims policy that widened the scope of comprehensive claims negotiations to include crucial issues raised by Aboriginal peoples. The second change occurred in 1990. Until this time, the government would negotiate no more than six claims at one time. After the new 1990 policy, there was no longer any limit on the number of claims the federal government was willing to negotiate with Aboriginal groups (DIAND, 2000).

Self-government

The concept of self-government includes sharing power with Ottawa and the provinces. How self-government is otherwise defined, however, differs between and among Aboriginal groups and by the Government of Canada. The Government of Canada, for example, largely views self-government as the self-administration of current Federal legislation and policies. In the predominant Aboriginal view today, on the other hand, self-government means that:

Indian First Nations should become an integral part of the Canadian federal system, sharing revenues as equals with the provinces and Ottawa, and designing their own social, administrative, and economic institutions (Comeau and Santin, 1995:71).

Canadian political geography would also change; the country would be parceled out into the existing provinces and territories, and also 604 smaller, Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people would regain control of their own law enforcement and court system, and of the land and its resources as sources of revenue for self-government (McDonald, 1995; Comeau and Santin, 1995).

It is now clear that the treaties signed between the mid-1700s and early 1900s had different meanings for Aboriginal people and British and Canadian authorities. The governments saw the treaties as a means to relocate Aboriginal communities whereas Aboriginal people saw them as a formal agreement to share the land in return for certain rights (MacLean, 1982). Aboriginal people see the act of regaining control of their land as an essential part of financing self-government. Aboriginal people also see land ownership as being necessary for defining "self" and regaining traditional Aboriginal way of life (Comeau and Santin, 1995).

In August 1995, the Government of Canada launched a process to negotiate practical arrangements with Aboriginal groups to make self-government a reality. The process involves extensive consultation with Aboriginal leaders at the local, regional and national levels, and the process is based on the view that the inherent right of Aboriginal self-government already exists within the Canadian Constitution. Its objectives are to establish a new partnership between Aboriginal peoples and the Government of Canada that will implement that right (Gathering Strength, 1996). Negotiations over self-government continue.

Has Progress Been Made?

The events of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s mark significant changes in Aboriginal influence in Canadian public policy making. Whereas Aboriginal people had little or no political involvement before this time, Aboriginal leaders are finally being included as part of the "Aboriginal problem" decision-making process. However, the impact of Aboriginal voices remains limited (McDonald, 1995).

PRESENT SITUATION

The challenges and opportunities facing Canada's Aboriginal people vary greatly, with those who live on the reserves facing a different set of circumstances than those who live in the urban areas.

Reserves: A Statistical Overview

- Approximately 60% of Registered Status Indians lived on-reserve in 1995.
- Almost half of reserve-based Aboriginal people belong to 435 bands with populations of less than 1,000 residents. Only 59 bands have populations greater than 2,000.
- One-third of the bands are located within 50 km of a major urban centre (urban reserves). Another 267 bands are located within 51 – 350 km of a major urban centre (rural reserves). 112 bands are accessible only by air ("special access" reserves). 26 bands are located more than 350 km from the nearest urban centre (remote reserves).
- The average income per capita on the reserves is $8,000. More than 66% of people are unemployed or on welfare.
- 70% of homes have furnaces, 83% of homes have indoor toilets and 91% have running water.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996

Life on the Reserves

Life on the reserves differs from life in urban centres. The following section outlines some features of this life, highlighting some of the key challenges faced by Aboriginal communities on reserves.

The first reserves appeared in Canada in the 1830s. As mentioned earlier, the colonialist government convinced the Aboriginal communities to give up their nomadic lifestyles, provided small areas of land (reserves) and banned traditional styles of government, introducing instead electoral selection of chiefs and band councils.

Today, Aboriginal bands continue to govern this way. Elected chiefs and council are the direct link to Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND) – they administer money provided to them by the Government of Canada for education, housing and welfare. However, there is seldom enough money to meet the needs of the people. As a result, Councils often overspend to meet the needs of the community, resulting in increasing debt and with Ottawa responding by withholding monies. This situation, combined with money mismanagement issues on some reserves, allows the cycle of poverty to continue (Comeau and Santin, 1995:37).

Poverty is a serious problem on the majority of reserves. Health problems are also a major concern, and stem generally from poor access to health practitioners and nutritious food, and from poor housing situations. Alcoholism and drug abuse, largely a result of unemployment, is endemic in many reserves, although some reserve members are taking the initiative to create "dry" environments (Comeau and Santin, 1995).

With the passing of the Indian Act, status Indians living on reserves became wards of the state. While this relationship is problematic, as wards of the state, status Indians are eligible for a wide range of government provided benefits and services. These include funding for housing, education, health care and social assistance. Status Indians living on reserves do not pay provincial or federal taxes (although as noted below, due to their low-income status, many reserve Indians would not pay income tax in any case). It is also interesting to note that status Indians living off reserve

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do pay taxes. Medical services are comprehensive for status Indians, whether or not they live on a reserve, and cover the cost of prescription drugs, dental services, eyeglasses and medical transportation. However, due to government cutbacks, there are cases where these services are no longer fully covered.

Life in the Cities

To date, at the expense of urban Aboriginal peoples, reform initiatives have largely focused on reserve based Aboriginal communities (The National Association of Friendship Centres and the Law Commission of Canada, 1999:8). However, of the 737,000 Canadians who identified themselves as being Aboriginal in the 1995 Census, only 40% live on reserves (Hill, 2000)

The Aboriginal population is increasingly urban; from 1981 to 1991, the urban Aboriginal population grew by 62%, compared to 11% for other urban populations. Migration rates were highest for Registered Indian youth (15-24 years of age): 72% changed locations between 1986 and 1991.

Aboriginal people quite often leave the reserves in hopes of finding a better life in the city. A small number are successful, but others are faced with poverty, unemployment, and other challenges that are similar to or greater than those faced on the reserve. Aboriginal people coming from the reserves generally do not have the skills needed for urban employment, are quite often under-educated in the formal education setting and, in the case of Aboriginal people moving to the cities from isolated communities, do not have English as a first language (Frideres, 1988). The latter barrier rarely impacts the majority of Aboriginal youth as many people have lost their traditional language due to assimilation policies. Recently, however, some secondary and post-secondary institutions are offering courses in different Aboriginal languages.

Aboriginal youth are among the most disadvantaged groups in urban Canada (Hill, 1999). Many feel that they do not fit in with mainstream society, have difficulty in school and finding work, and often run into trouble both inside and outside of the home. More than half of urban Aboriginal youth lived in poverty in 1995, and this number is predicted to increase in the future (Hill, 1999).

The Role of Women in Aboriginal Societies: Past to Present

Aboriginal women faced many challenges before contact with Europeans. However, contact with European culture caused traditional roles, and the respect these women received in the community because of these roles, to erode. Aboriginal women soon faced challenges that were a direct result of Canadian Aboriginal policy (RCAP, 1995).

Women played a prominent role in the political and cultural life of many traditional societies. They were honored as the givers of life, which was viewed as a special gift of the creator. Women's roles and responsibilities differed from culture to culture, ranging from being prominent political actors to being subordinate members in their community. Regardless, their skills and knowledge made them an essential part of the community (RCAP, 1996).

The struggle of Aboriginal women has brought them into the political arena. There are many Aboriginal political organizations that focus only on the rights of Aboriginal women. Many Aboriginal women are pursuing careers and opportunities that enable them to play pivotal roles both in their own communities and in non-Aboriginal communities.

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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The fact that Aboriginal people have maintained elements of their identity and culture in the face of systematic racism and a history of assimilation policies is testimony to the strength and perseverance of Aboriginal people. Although conditions are improving as a result of Aboriginal run and Aboriginal focused programs and initiatives, barriers to "co-existing" with mainstream culture remain.

This section will identify some of the challenges faced by Aboriginal peoples in the areas of justice, employment, health and education. While the negative effects of these challenges are felt most strongly and personally by the Aboriginal community, failing to resolve these issues negatively impacts all Canadians. As will be demonstrated, there are large cultural differences in how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities address each of these spheres. The opportunity for Canada lies in finding ways to reconcile the cultural differences within policies and programs. As illustrated earlier in this document, when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people originally met, there was, on a certain level, mutual respect and mutual learning. This relationship could re-emerge in this century, and power dynamics could become more balanced, if changes are made at both the political and social levels to ensure that the interests and needs of Aboriginal people are reflected in public policies and programs.

Justice. Aboriginal people are over-represented in Canada's correctional facilities. Aboriginal men represent 30% of the population in provincial jails and Aboriginal women 45%, despite making up less than 4% of the population (Statistics Canada, 1996). In addition, studies show that Aboriginal people accused of a crime are more likely to be denied bail, spend more time in pre-trial detention, are more likely to be charged with multiple offences and are twice as likely to be incarcerated (The Partners, 1999 – 2000).

This over-representation may be in part addressed through culturally appropriate crime programs. As noted earlier, Aboriginal law was typically based on the four principles of caring, sharing, honesty and respect; as such, justice systems often emphasized conflict resolution and healing over punitive measures. This approach differs sharply from the Canadian common law tradition, which is based on an individual-rights philosophy. Justice programs that are based on the Aboriginal conflict resolution model may prove more effective for the Aboriginal community.

Education. Aboriginal people have a lower educational attainment level than Canadians overall, with only 20% of Aboriginal people having completed high school (compared to 70% of non-Aboriginal people) (Statistics Canada, 1996). The most serious source of problems in school for Aboriginal youth are socio-economic circumstances such as low income/poverty, cultural collisions, and the absence of a knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture. This limited education significantly lowers employment opportunities and income.

There are similarities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures with respect to education. Aboriginal tradition dictates that specific knowledge and understanding is taught. Just as in the Canadian system, strict and specific lines of authority recognize ability, and restrictions are placed on people who have not achieved specific levels of knowledge and understanding. The key difference between the cultures' approaches to education is in the format of learning. While the non-Aboriginal culture emphasizes books and classroom learning, Aboriginal culture stresses learning through observation of and training by elders. One step to making educational programs targeted at Aboriginal youth more accessible is to balance the classroom approach with more hands-on training. It is possible that this would assist in improving the comfort level of Aboriginal students, thus inspiring them to complete their formal education.

Health. There are significant health differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Compared to national averages, Aboriginal people have higher incidences of suicide, diabetes, tuberculosis, infant mortality, death by respiratory problems, and death by injury (DIAND, 1996) Many of the health challenges facing Aboriginal

peoples relate to poverty and issues of substance abuse (The Partners, 1999 – 2000).

There are important distinctions between how the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures approach health and medicine. Health, as defined by Europeans, is generally based on a disease and biological model. In Aboriginal cultures, health is defined as healing, and emphasis is placed on the need for healing circles and the restoration of physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual harmony. To promote Aboriginal health, it is important that Aboriginal people have access to both traditional forms of healing and culturally sensitive "mainstream" health services and programs.

Employment. Aboriginal people are over-represented in the lowest socio-economic classes and occupational groups. On average, Aboriginal men earn approximately 25% less than anglo-Canadian men while Aboriginal women earn 12% less than anglo-Canadian women (Statistics Canada, 1996). The labour force participation rate is nearly the same for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people at 74.7%, but unemployment rates for Aboriginal people are nearly double those of Canadians overall (Statistics Canada, 1996). Despite a growing labour pool, Aboriginal people have higher unemployment rates for a variety of reasons including insufficient education/job training, lack of access to the "right information networks," inadequate knowledge (or rejection) of mainstream mores and racism. There are also cultural challenges. Traditionally, Aboriginal people lived off the land. In contemporary society, traditional Aboriginal forms of employment are scarce, and are generally seasonal. Non-traditional employment is difficult for Aboriginal people to acquire, due to factors such as low levels of education, lack of training, and racism. Addressing Aboriginal unemployment will require addressing the educational and training needs of the Aboriginal community, and reducing racism in Canadian businesses and society.

CONCLUSION

The challenges and opportunities facing Aboriginal people today must be addressed jointly by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people are working hard to break the cycles of poverty and abuse that stem in part from the assimilation policies set up by the Government of Canada. They are forming political and community groups and organizations in order to re-establish an Aboriginal identity that combines elements of Aboriginal tradition and present day realities.

By working together to find ways in which to create a society where differences are respected, it will be possible to create opportunities for all Canadians. The following story, which outlines the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, presents the choice now at hand:

> The Ojibwa tell an old story. Eight fires would come to the Indian people. Each would bring great changes to the peoples' lives. Ojibwa prophets foretold what the fires would be like.
>
> The first three fires were early in Ojibwa history. The fourth prophet told of the coming of the Europeans, called Zhagonosh in Ojibwa. The fifth warned that there would be a great struggle between the Indians and the Zhagonosh. The sixth prophet said that the Indian children would turn against their elders. They would forget their history. The Indian ways would almost disappear. The seventh prophet spoke of a time when the Zhagonosh would be given a choice for all of the nations of Canada.
>
> The seven prophets were preparing the way for an eighth and last fire still to come. They said that the chiefs would not be able to control this fire. What happened would depend on the choice made by the Zhagonosh. It could be a fire of destruction. The fire could turn back on its makers when the wind changed. Or it could become an everlasting fire of peace, love and brotherhood (MacLean, 1982:130).

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